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Senate Speeches on the Arts and Humanities (1994-1996): Speech 22

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STATEMENT OF SENATOR CLAIBORNE PELL

Mr. President, I oppose this amendment. The Endowments are a tiny portion of a percentage of the national budget. Their funding has shrunk in real dollars ever since 1979 and the legislation before us already makes further enormous cuts in funding to the Endowments. Further funding cuts of this magnitude for the Endowments would be injurious to cultural projects all around the country -- harm far disproportionate to the real dollar savings to the government.

Some have spoken of a privatization of the Endowments. The reality is that no government agency is going to be able to raise billions of dollars in private funds for grant activities. The private sector -- foundations, corporations and private patrons -- is already contributing the vast majority of cultural funding in our society. The Endowment funds provide the vital lever to encourage this involvement, but the private and philanthropic sectors are not going to contribute to the federal government so that the government can turn around and re-grant the money. I do not think that anyone would consider such an arrangement an efficient use of resources.

The Endowments' budgets have been shrinking significantly over the last decade, despite the fact that every Endowment dollar brings many more from the private sector to bear on increasing the quality and availability of art and scholarship for our citizens. We are in a very strict budgetary situation. Nevertheless, this cut is far out of proportion to cuts in other government programs and would harm our policy of federal cultural support leveraging private funds from around the country. Despite a very few controversial grants, some thirty out of over 100,000, I believe that the Arts and Humanities Endowments, on the whole, have a marvelous effect on American culture.

I believe that NEA Chairman Jane Alexander has taken Congressional concerns regarding the agency very seriously. She has instituted a series of valuable changes to the Endowment, all of which are incorporated in the authorization legislation recently reported out of the Labor and Human Resources Committee.

Mr. President, this amendment would eliminate the viability of the National Endowments and make it impossible for them to have even a modest effect in supporting American culture. I hope my colleagues will oppose this amendment.

STATEMENT OF SENATOR CLAIBORNE PELL

Mr. President, eliminating the direct grant program included in this legislation would do great harm to our efforts to support cultural development in our nation. Direct grants support projects of the highest artistic calibre around the country. Providing an opportunity for our artists to create American literature, music, dance and theater was one of the core aspirations motivating the foundation of an Arts Endowment. Ideally, a National Endowment quietly fosters the creative spirit, allowing the production of significant work, then equally quietly departs the scene when the works become successful.

Judged by these criteria, the Endowment's grants to individual artists have been a great success. Artists who have received fellowships from the National Endowment have gone on to win myriad awards, including 46 Pulitzer Prizes, 48 Macarthur "genius" awards, 28 National Book awards, and many others.

This bill ensures that every grant application is subject to stringent analysis by several levels of review. Eliminating direct grants will not erase every grant that some Americans find offensive, but it will make it impossible for much of our most creative American citizens to make their best contribution to their society. They say that talent does what it can, genius does what it must, but neither will be able to do anything at all if it means the individual will starve. It is well known that private sector support for artists is extremely limited -- companies and patrons generally support institutional projects -- where they can get some prominent attention for their sponsorship. Support of individual artists is central to the mission of the NEA -- essentially to provide a fertile environment for creative talent in our nation.

STATEMENT OF SENATOR CLAIBORNE PELL

Mr. President, sending so much of the Endowment's monies in block grant to the states would undermine the effectiveness of our support for culture. Disrupting the federal-state partnership in this way would injure the vital goals of supporting artistic excellence and access to the arts for Americans. Although a strong state presence is important in furthering the arts in our society, this amendment would further reduce national competition on the basis of excellence and all but eliminate the viability of the Endowment as an entity representing this nation's commitment to culture. The bill as written already significantly increases the set-aside to the states.

I note that the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies itself opposes changes in the share of funds allocated to the states. The states understand full well the necessity for a strong federal partner for their success. First, shifting federal funds away from the Endowment, means elimination of many projects that have national or regional impact. Second, federal funds have a far greater multiplier effect on arts funding, increasing the amount of funds going to support artists and arts organizations. Thus, this amendment would frustrate one of the most admirable strategies of the Endowment -- increasing matching funds for the arts from state and private sources. The federal government will simply receive less bang for its buck and our culture will suffer accordingly. Only a national agency provides the widespread renown for the best arts organizations and artists because patrons and corporations pay attention to the national recognition that comes with federal support.

I urge my colleagues to reject this amendment. Some of the richest arts programs take place in the form of national partnerships between organizations in different states and require a strong national entity to encourage their work. Endowment supported theater and dance groups, operas and symphonies which leave their city stages and tour the country, radio and television programs, and major music and art institutions all require national support. These programs cross state boundaries and therefore would not receive funding from independent state arts councils. I urge my colleagues to reject this amendment.